

# **FLORIDA SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION**

## **WHITE PAPER: IMPLEMENTATION OF THE CLASS SIZE REDUCTION AMENDMENT**

### **INTRODUCTION**

In November 2002, Florida voters approved an amendment to Article IX, Section 1 of the Florida Constitution establishing maximum on class size limits by grade level. In approving the constitutional amendment, the people of Florida have expressed their belief that the constitutionally guaranteed “uniform, efficient, safe, secure, and high quality system of free public schools” would be enhanced through smaller class sizes. At the same time, voters reiterated that it is “a paramount duty of the state to make adequate provision” for education by providing clear direction within the amendment that the state is responsible for payment of the costs associated with implementing this class size reduction initiative.

The Florida School Boards Association (FSBA) recognizes that state policymakers face the tremendous and complex task of determining how best to interpret and implement this class size reduction (CSR) initiative. FSBA has prepared this paper to offer information and recommendations to assist policymakers in shaping a CSR implementation strategy that is consistent with the “will of the people” and is grounded on five guiding principles:

- ! CSR implementation strategies must be designed to enhance student achievement.
- ! CSR implementation strategies must be educationally sound.
- ! CSR implementation strategies must be adequately and equitably funded.
- ! CSR implementation strategies must be designed to provide maximum flexibility to school districts in order to meet the unique needs and diversity of each district.
- ! CSR implementation strategies must maximize fiscal and operational efficiency.

### **RESEARCH AND DEBATE**

Prior to voter approval of the CSR amendment, the debate about class size reduction in Florida had become a political football with both proponents and opponents seeming to selectively cite only the research and other data that served to bolster their position. Since there are currently more than 20 states that have engaged in some form of CSR initiative, there is an abundance of information available on this subject. However, it is important to note that very few of these state initiatives are grounded by scientific research methods and the results must be viewed as subjective and anecdotal in nature. Furthermore, most CSR initiatives are coupled with other components – such as enhanced teacher training and/or redesigned curriculum – as part of a comprehensive program aimed at improving student achievement. As a result, it is

difficult to attribute the successes or failures of these programs directly and solely to the CSR component.

To date, the clearest and most comprehensive CSR research data is drawn from Tennessee's Student-Teacher Achievement Ratio (STAR) study – which offers the only significant research that meets most criteria for being a scientifically controlled experiment designed to isolate and evaluate the effects of CSR – and Wisconsin's Student Achievement Guarantee in Education (SAGE) program – which targets schools with students in poverty. Both of these acclaimed studies underpin the core of support for CRS as a means to improve student achievement and general attitudes as well as promote greater performance and job satisfaction among teachers. Indeed, a review of the STAR and SAGE research findings, as well as the anecdotal and subjective data from other states' CSR initiatives, consistently indicates several positive results that can be directly linked to CSR:

- ! CSR provides the clearest, measurable benefits to students in grades K - 3.
- ! Students in smaller classes significantly outperform their counterparts in regular classrooms across all subject areas on criterion- and norm-referenced tests.
- ! CSR serves to narrow the achievement gap for minority and low-income students.
- ! Students in smaller classes exhibit more initiative, greater effort toward their school work, and less disruptive and inattentive behavior.
- ! CSR has lasting beneficial effects on participating students after they progress to higher grades and transition into regular size classes.
- ! CSR improves teacher performance and satisfaction and can serve as a powerful teacher recruitment tool.

The same research and data also reveals one significant and compelling negative impact: CSR is expensive, particularly with regard to funding for teacher salaries, facilities and ongoing operational costs. This raises substantial and legitimate concern among opponents as to whether CRS is the best and most cost efficient means for obtaining the educational benefits listed above. Most thoughtful critics of CRS contend that equal or greater results can be obtained through less expensive means such as improved teacher preparation and training. The cost of CSR is of particular concern in Florida due to current fiscal constraints coupled with an existing shortage of qualified teachers and facilities.

Certainly, under other circumstances, policymakers should always compare the costs and benefits of alternative education reform strategies before allocating scarce resources. However, Florida's constitutional mandate to implement a comprehensive K-12 CSR program leaves little room to consider alternatives that may be more cost effective. Therefore, policymakers are now left with the challenge of evaluating the available research and balancing the positive and negative aspects of CSR in order to devise a cost effective strategy for implementing this initiative. To assist policymakers in this endeavor, FSBA offers several recommendations.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **! Definitions for key terms**

1. “average number of students in each classroom” – District averages of student to teacher ratios in K-grade 3, grades 4-8 and grades 9-12 should be used. Baseline district averages should be calculated each year in conjunction with the October student membership survey. District averages should be in compliance with CSR goals for that year by the February student membership survey. Specialized classroom teachers, such as reading coaches, math specialists, writing specialists and co-teachers should be included in the calculation district averages.
2. “extracurricular classes” – Classes that are exempt from the calculation of district averages should include non-core academic classes such as health, physical education, fine arts (chorus, band, dance, etc), vocational education, etc. Dual enrollment, Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate and similar programs should also to be excluded from the district averages. District averages should be based only on enrollment in core academic classes (mathematics, language arts/reading, science, social studies, foreign languages, Exceptional Student Education, English for Speakers of Other Languages, and the traditional self-contained elementary school classroom).

### **! Facilities**

1. Create a new, stable funding mechanism for school construction, patterned after the 1997 Classrooms First program.
2. Ensure that districts that have been proactive in planning and construction of schools – i.e. passing sales tax referendums, bond issues, etc. – remain eligible for an equitable share of any state construction funds.
3. Ensure that all FISH/S-REF capacity requirements are consistent with the constitutionally established class maximums.
4. Repeal all statutory references to “small school” requirements.
5. Repeal or roll back statutory deadlines for the required modification of existing relocatable classrooms and eliminate statutory restrictions on the purchase and/or lease of relocatable classrooms.
6. At least during the initial CSR implementation phase, provide flexibility for school districts to utilize non-conventional spaces for classrooms, including the joint use of facilities in partnership with businesses,

community colleges and other entities.

**! Personnel**

1. Provide increased flexible funding for competitive salaries and benefits without supplanting current funding.
2. Provide funds to lengthen the school day by one hour at the secondary (middle and high school) level to expand the teaching day and promote differentiated staffing and compensation.
2. Allow school districts to re-employ classroom teachers into full time service after completing DROP and/or extend DROP participation from 60 to 96 months.
3. Remove any barriers to certification of qualified prospective teachers.
4. Streamline certification for out-of-state teachers and provide full reciprocity for out of state teachers with satisfactory performance records.
5. Increase funding and opportunities for staff development, teacher training and mentoring.

**! Operational Funding**

1. Create a new categorical program to fund the operational costs of implementing CRS and ensure that all such funds are distributed equitably among school districts, based upon the FEFP formula.
2. Provide districts with the flexibility to use operational funds in a manner that is consistent with CSR goals and which best meets the personnel and facilities needs of the district.
3. Provide flexibility for districts to use funds out of the 2.0 mills capital outlay to pay property insurance and other fixed costs relating to facilities.
4. Consider establishing a state equalization factor for the discretionary .51 mill levy.
5. The impact of reduced class size upon federal funding must be determined and all budget recommendations should adhere to the federal requirements that specialized federal funds (e.g., Title I, Title VI, IDEA, etc.) be used to supplement, not supplant, dollars for class size reduction.
6. The funding mechanism should reward districts that use creative and efficient methods to implement the amendment.

## **! General Administrative Issues**

1. Allow each district to develop an individualized CSR implementation plan that outlines the specific time lines, goals, costs, special circumstances, need for waivers, and assessment and accountability for CRS implementation.
2. Create an appeal process for districts to explain any circumstances that interfere with successful implementation or defend local decisions that may be viewed as non-compliant.
3. Create a database of available research on CSR initiatives that may be accessed by school districts and help guide them with their individual implementation plan.
4. Create a proactive public information campaign so that citizens may ask questions and access information about the requirements and time line for implementation of CSR.

## **SUMMARY**

In an effort to assist policymakers in designing a coherent and productive CSR implementation strategy, FSBA has provided information and recommendations based upon guiding principals that support and promote student achievement, sound education policy, equity, flexibility and efficiency. A brief review of the salient CSR research highlights the potential positive impacts of CSR – improved student achievement and teacher performance – as well as the negative assertion that CRS may not be the most desirable or cost effective education reform strategy.

However, faced with the constitutional mandate to implement CSR, several recommendations were offered with the intent of maximizing the positive outcomes of this initiative while minimizing the possible negative impacts. Essential to this process is agreement on reasonable definitions of key terms. FSBA has recommended that during the CSR implementation phase that class size be calculated according to district averages and should take into account only identified core academic classes. In order to promote better utilization of facilities and construction funding, FSBA has suggested that new and equitable funding be provided, that a number of statutory requirements be repealed or delayed, and that capacity calculations be aligned. To encourage the recruitment and retention of qualified teachers, FSBA has proposed strategies to increase salary funding, eliminate barriers to certification and provide for additional staff development. To provide necessary operational funding, FSBA has proposed the creation of new or expanded funding mechanisms, increased district flexibility and alignment with federal funding streams. To ensure a smooth transition, FSBA has offered advice on administrative processes to provide accountability and dissemination of information to and from the state, school districts and the public.